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1 Gavin Jones. *American Hungers. The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. 20/21 Series. ISBN: 978-0-691-12753-8.

2 *American Hungers. The Problem of Poverty in U.S. Literature, 1840-1945* by Gavin Jones is an insightful study of the ways of representing poverty in selected works by Herman Melville, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, James Agee, and Richard Wright. The choice of authors for discussion perhaps suggests a limited scope of the book, but this is a false impression. Jones has a good reason for narrowing down his perspective, because he does not aspire to produce a historical overview of the literary depictions of poverty from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and instead he aims to work out a reading procedure which would capture poverty in its entire complexity and which, as it were, is tested on the selected narratives. The author of *American Hungers* observes that while the construction of class has finally been recognized as a prominent issue in American literary studies, the amount of criticism on this subject is visibly outnumbered by a profusion of books on related political issues of race and gender. Moreover, the existing discussions of poverty, notwithstanding their undeniable influence on the understanding of modern American literature, allegedly have one limiting tendency in common, namely they treat poverty in predominantly thematic terms. For Jones, in turn, poverty is not simply a theme, but "a category," the word he keeps emphasizing throughout his text. Symptomatically, this word, even though it emanates a sense of scientific rigor, in essence reflects the elusiveness of poverty as experience and discourse. Jones implies that the reason why critics have been unable to problematize poverty with utmost adequacy is that they have usually attempted to concretize it in ways which are too specific, for example by connecting poverty with the experience of the lower social classes, as if "socioeconomic suffering" – to use one of Jones's key terms – could not affect representatives of the middle class. In other words, poverty is a matter of measurable economic deprivation as much as a matter of individual feelings and perceptions where all measures fall short. The point is that the designation of poverty as "a category" combines factors of culture, economy, and psychology, and at the intersections of these

three spheres of human experience, there arise a variety of dialectical relations which constitute the focus of Jones's study.

3 Jones distinguishes three models of class criticism which provide the background for his own approach: the affirmative, the deconstructive, and the composite. The studies employing the first model "highlight the culture of the working class, rather than the socioeconomic situation of the poor" (9). Such criticism is called affirmative because it explores the formation of class identity which represents a certain ontological value and therefore potentially signifies a positive experience. The problem is that the recognition of the strength of the working class, more often than not, entails a failure to incorporate into the overall view of things the most sordid aspects of poverty. Jones suggests that it is the readings dwelling upon class identity that characteristically consider poverty in thematic terms. In the deconstructive model, poverty becomes a relational and contingent category, dissociated from economic determinism. It puts stress on the mobility and changeability of social classes as well as on the existence of unique individual identities which diverge from the generalizing ideological inventions of class, race, and gender. If poverty is a transitory phenomenon, inevitably effecting its own disintegration, its material manifestations in the social domain and its psychological impact in the personal sphere lose relevance. In Jones's words, the deconstructive reading procedure tends "to nebulize the issue of poverty, dissolving it into categorical indistinctness and impermanence" (13). While Jones's critical project draws from all three existing models of class criticism, it seems that he approaches the deconstructive practice with particular caution. Finally, there is the composite model which links the issue of poverty to that of race or gender. There is no arguing about the connection between poverty and the extent to which the status of women and non-white populations is determined by the denial of economic rights, however, the idea of causality is much more complicated than it initially seems to be. It can be said that, in the composite model, poverty on the one hand and race or gender on the other are competitive rather than complementary categories in the sense that their combination often raises a question about which factor is decisive for an individual's socioeconomic situation. Against the backdrop of the affirmative, deconstructive, and composite models of theorizing poverty as a social and literary category, Jones defines his own critical formula and first asserts that poverty should be seen as closely related to, but not fully dependent on, the discursive constructions of class, race, and gender. He postulates that attention be paid to "material disadvantage," and not "personal failure" (16). Poverty should be examined on its own terms, which is at variance with a frequent tendency to view it as the reverse of the desired social achievement. Cultural and psychological insights should not be separated from the reactions or attitudes resulting from economic need. With regard to literary aesthetics, Jones claims that the most incisive readings of poverty concentrate on texts which confront "the tensions involved in producing discursive richness from analyses of poorness" (19), and not on those which appropriate the poor for the bourgeois.

4 In Chapter One, devoted to Herman Melville's writing, Jones situates the writer's work in the context of mid-nineteenth-century conventionalized literary depictions of poverty in genres such as sentimental novels, "panic fictions," and melodramatic plays. He talks about regional differences in literary representations of the poor, and notices an essential convergence between the narratives of Southern humor and the sentimental novels by Northern authors in that both genres sought "the causes of poverty in the moral and

intellectual degradation of the individual" (32). The texts which depart from such conventional imaginings are Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills." While ethical concerns are visible in both these narratives, Thoreau and Davis avoid the simplistic equation of poverty with moral degradation, and, to some extent, dissociate the causes of poverty from the immediate socioeconomic context so as to better highlight the determining power of cultural and psychological factors. Thoreau's and Davis's multi-faceted reformulations of a conventionalized theme function as a prelude to Melville. Jones discusses a considerable selection of texts by Melville: *Redburn*, *Israel Potter*, sketches from the mid-1850s, *Pierre*, and *Confidence-Man*, to show the diversity of contexts in which poverty has been thematized in his prose. The point is that, for the author of *Pierre*, socioeconomic suffering is neither race- nor gender-specific, and it affects representatives of different social environments. Jones concludes that Melville "keeps... in tune with recent sociological arguments that allegedly ingrained values of the poor are not internal subcultural creations but matters of situational expediency" (60-61).

5 In Chapter Two, devoted to the representation of poverty in the Progressive Era on the basis of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Jones observes that the closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a crucial reformulation of the theory of economic necessity. Essentially, this change was characterized by a departure from moral explanations of poverty toward environmental ones, even though narratives stressing the connection between poverty and moral degradation were still written. The recognition of social conditions as the primary cause of economic deprivation led to more sympathetic depictions of the poor in comparison with those from the mid-nineteenth century. However, the notable interest in poverty as reflected in the literary production of the time entailed a possibility that the aestheticization of poverty would divert attention from the tangible problem itself. Dreiser and Wharton avoid the pitfalls of a superficial, aestheticized view of poverty, the former by extending his narrative with references to contemporary scientific theories, the latter by a specific linking of economic need to gender. In this chapter, Jones discusses in detail the notion of pauperism, which was used in the second half of the nineteenth century to distinguish the poor who allegedly deserved their hopeless existence from those who were not to blame for their fall; by the end of the century, this notion gained particular currency as a discursive tool in the diagnosis of economic deprivation as a diseased state. In general, the scientific framework for the study of poverty in the Progressive Era was borrowed from eugenics. In focusing on the figure of Hurstwood, Jones explores the diagnostic, pseudoscientific underpinnings of *Sister Carrie*. In turn, *The House of Mirth* is presented in the context of the literature of female philanthropy which flourished at the turn of the century and which, symptomatically, emanated both the attraction to and the revulsion with poverty, in spite of the women writers' evident reformatory aspirations and genuine personal compassion for the poor. Jones highlights the revolutionary quality of Wharton's novel, resulting from the drastic presentation of the economic insecurity of women in the domestic environment.

6 Chapter Three concentrates on two books which document poverty during the Depression: James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*. First of all, Jones observes that the 1930s and 40s witnessed a proliferation of nonfiction accounts, employing the personal literary mode and reflecting the need to understand the social as much as the personal manifestations of crisis. Jones claims that the

narratives by Agee and Wright share "an identical concern with the power of poverty to bewilder both the subject and the observer of socioeconomic suffering, its power to destroy coherent thought and to limit access to the stuff of consciousness" (108). The contextual framework for the analysis of *Let Us Now Praise* and *Black Boy* includes a variety of texts, ranging from William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* to James Rorty's *Where Life Is Better* and Nathan Asch's *The Road*. With regard to Agee's book, Jones explores its central ambivalence, namely the narrative movement from the analysis of the environmentalist causes of poverty, accomplished with unique percipience, to the explanation of individual, psychological factors. As a consequence, the impression that poverty is a state of degeneration gradually becomes enhanced. Importantly, this degeneration described by Agee does not fill him with disgust, but quite on the contrary, it arouses his growing fascination with the victims of economic deprivation. Therefore Jones asserts that even though Agee's book is a unique literary variant of democratic discourse, its ethical implications about the captivating aspect of human damage caused by socioeconomic suffering ultimately destroy this democratic appeal. In Wright's autobiography, poverty has a specific thematic connection to the motif of hunger, which highlights the author's need for self-comprehension and self-articulation. Furthermore, hunger as a dramatic manifestation of poverty signifies that socioeconomic need is a cross-racial phenomenon. Jones writes about the dialectical configurations in Wright's book, concluding that, in the writer's view, "an individual can bear the scars of social suffering yet still have the capacity to depict this traumatic situation not because poverty is comprehended rationally but because its irrationality and damage, its bewilderment, are confronted and communicated" (147).

7 On the whole, Gavin Jones's *American Hungers* is a major contribution to the critical debate about literary constructions of poverty in America across epochs; or rather, the book redefines the terms for this debate in such a way that establishes poverty as a valid subject of discussion in its own right, no longer a mere addition to class, race or gender criticism. Even though Jones writes only about five major texts of American literature, the scope of his presentation is impressive, with insights into cultural, economic, ideological, psychological, and ethical complexities. One of his main intentions is to demonstrate the "in between-ness" of poverty, which simultaneously affects different spheres of individual and collective experience. If poverty ever becomes a category capable of creating a distinct tradition of critical analysis, *American Hungers* will undeniably be one of the fundamental works of this tradition.

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